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Here be monsters: a choreomaniac's companion to the *danse macabre*

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Consider this a *vade mecum*: an invitation to “walk with me” through more or less uncanny terrains of worlds in the making in search, off(f) course, of monsters. The search will be delving into the areas of “creepypasta:” pieces of cursed prose and pictures that circulate online, waiting to contaminate and possess the next reader. Using a theoretical framework of posthuman and feminist theory, not least the work done by Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway, this *vade mecum* asks what it might mean to engage ethically with that which is not supposed to exist, but which haunts us nonetheless. In other words: what does it mean to move, live and engage with spectres in digital times?

Keywords: posthumanism; ethics; feminist theory; Jacques Derrida; monsters; Donna Haraway; horror; internet; digital media; creative writing; gothic; dance; spectrality; spectre; hauntology

Walk with me

Companion comes from the Latin cum panis, “with bread” [...] A companion in literary contexts is a vade mecum or handbook, like the Oxford Companion to wine or English verse; such companions help readers consume well.

– Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (2008, 17)

Consider this a *vade mecum*: an invitation to “walk with me” through more or less uncanny terrains of worlds in the making in search, off(f) course, of monsters.¹ The search will be a difficult one, seeing that monsters are typically understood to be “excessive” or somehow “lacking” and therefore only possible to pin down in a handbook as that which exceeds its pages or something that is simply missing.² This is no less true when it comes to pinpointing monsters on maps: mythical creatures are no strangers to maps and can be found on both the medieval and Renaissance kind, but what is missing is that legendary written warning of old sea maps – “Here be Monsters” – a warning that has become part of a general and pop-cultural knowledge. As Scully says to Mulder in an episode of the popular TV show *The X-Files*: “You know on the old mariners’ maps the cartographers would designate uncharted territories by writing ‘Here be Monsters,’” to which Mulder replied: “I’ve got a map of New York just like that.”³

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But Scully was wrong. There are in fact no maps on which uncharted territories are marked in this way. The same is the case with the alternative “Here be Dragons.” “That English mapmakers formerly placed the phrase ‘here be dragons’ at the edges of their known world has somehow become general knowledge,” writes Erin C. Blake, “and here is the list of all known historical maps upon which these words appear.”⁴ This is followed by no list at all – a blank – since such maps would have been from “a time and place where Latin was the language of learning.”⁵ But even replacing “here be dragons” with *hic sunt dracones* does not make much of a difference, since these words have only ever appeared on two depictions of the world: the Lenox Globe (c. 1503–7) and a map of the world found in *La Fleur des Histoires* (c. 1460–70) by Jean Mansel.⁶

This *vade mecum* will be traversing territories of the online, which are cluttered with nautical metaphors such as “streaming,” “surfing,” “pirates,” “wetware,” “phishing,” and “flooding,”⁷ connecting them with the uncharted worlds of the deep sea that remains, to Western minds, one of the final frontiers for explorers. If there be monsters at all, surely this is where they can be found, and with the Here be Monsters map I believed to have found a navigational instrument with which to bring mythical creatures and their haunted sense of time and space together with “reality,” with “real” life cartographies and “real” history. Now the monster maps had dissolved in my hands and become specters themselves, cutting all links to an “actual” time and place in history. While searching for monsters this *vade mecum* will therefore also enact a monster cartography, drawing up a Here be Monsters map that might, perhaps, be used as a navigational instrument, a handbook on how to steer haunted realms such as the spectral worlds of the World Wide Web. It will therefore begin with the story of another explorer and cartographer: Young Mr. L. and his search for the elusive specter of Smile.dog.

The Curious Case of Smile.jpg

I first met in person with Mary E. in the summer of 2007. I had arranged with her husband of fifteen years, Terence, to see her for an interview. Mary had initially agreed since I was not a newsman but rather an amateur writer gathering information for a few early college assignments and, if all went according to plan, some pieces of fiction.

– Mr. L., *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*

So begins the story of *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*. The narrator, Mr. L., goes on to explain how Mary E. in the very last minute refuses to see him and speak of what was supposed to have been the subject of the interview: the .jpeg image she encountered back in the 1990s, and which is rumored to have the ability to drive people mad, even kill them (Figure 1). Mary, however, survived the encounter with the .jpeg and now claims that a dog-like creature called Smile.dog haunts her nightmares, promising to leave her alone if she shows its picture to someone else. As it says:

“Spread the word”

The Curious Case is a so-called “creepypasta,” which is a subgenre of horror that is meant to circulate online through the means of copy (*creepy*) and paste (*pasta*). Creepypasta is the younger sibling of copypasta: text, pictures and video files, mostly created by

anonymous artists, that have been copied and pasted onto message boards, e-mails, or various social media. They earn the “creepy” over the “copy” by being primarily about paranormal or otherwise disturbing subjects.

As in the case of *The Curious Case of Smile.jpg*, creepypasta often play on the aesthetics of the “real” and “authentic” by taking on the shape and form of diaries, witness statements, scientific reports, articles, message-board dialogues, video, etc. These trails form a narrative of failed explorations into the realms of the paranormal, often starring explorers who are intent on unveiling the secrets of the supernatural, catching specters on film or, as in the case of Mr. L., pinning them down onto the pages of “a few early college assignments” and “some pieces of fiction” in order to conquer the unexplored. As Mr. L. puts it:

What caught my interest [...] was the sheer lack of information, usually to the point that people don't believe it even exists other than as a rumor or hoax. It is unique because, though the entire phenomenon centers on a picture file, that file is nowhere to be found on the internet ...⁸

In creepypasta narratives, the gaze mediates such conquests of the unknown. This remains true in *The Curious Case*, in which Mr. L. wants to find and see for himself the elusive picture file of Smile.dog. In this sense Mr. L.'s quest operates through a traditional, Western understanding of knowledge production, in which scientific objectivity “sees” the world by keeping it at arm's length. Donna Haraway has dubbed this approach to objectivity “the God trick,” and she criticizes the Western illusion of the subject of knowledge as being someone who can leave his body behind and enter a “conquering gaze from nowhere,”⁹ remaining safe and untouched by the object of knowledge.

In much creepypasta, however, there is no possibility of remaining untouched. Seeing is summoning, and summoning is about being seen in return, as many creepypasta explorers are forced to recognize. And through the explorers the readers, too, are met by the gaze of the monster, since the “authenticity” of such tales as well as the “evidence” provided in forms of diary entries, photographs, and video clips introduces the monster to the “meatspace” of flesh-and-blood creepypasta readers. They spread the word, so to say, making the search for monsters a risky one indeed. In *The Curious Case* Mr. L. slowly comes to the same conclusion and starts to worry that looking for a monster might trigger a response and a looking back: an invitation to a kind of companionship that cannot be held at arm's length. Smile.dog is rumored to seep through skin and nestle behind eyelids like a piece of the magic mirror, no longer reflecting but working as a lens, a prism, a “spreading of the word.” Seeing is not just *believing* when it comes to Smile.dog, but rather *becoming*: an encounter in itself that may spark a more or less unwanted companionship. For this reason, Mr. L. starts to doubt whether he really does want to see and risk being seen in return. That is when he receives an e-mail with an attachment called, of course, “smile.jpg:”

Hello

I found your e-mail address thru a mailing list your profile said you are interested in smiledog. I have saw it it is not as bad as everyone says I have sent it to you here. Just spreading the word.:)¹⁰

Beginnings of *danse*

Questing for monstrous companions can get a piece of magic mirror stuck in your eye, merging organisms and glass, fact and fiction, reality and myth. This makes it impossible to perform a Cartesian cut between subject and object, human and monster: that is, the very dualisms needed to sustain the subject of knowledge within traditional humanist thought. This is a subject that, in order to stay human, must be “on the opposite side of the Great Divide from all the others and so [...] afraid of – and in bloody love with – what goes bump in the night,”¹¹ as Haraway puts it. *Looking for* monsters and being *looked at* by monsters, however, threatens to shake the Divide, spawning hybrid connections through contaminations, possessions, curses – and dance. After all, no creatures pre-exist their relations, Haraway argues, and these relations might best be imagined as a “dance of relating”¹² in which actors take shape in a process that she, inspired by Gilles Deleuze, calls “becoming with.”¹³ There is no stable “being” in this dance, no constant constitutive dualism between the partners, and therefore no proper place for the dancers, either; the partners shift and twirl in the dance, changing places through the act of respect, that is, transformations through mutual *respecere*.¹⁴ Each responds to the other by looking back and being looked back at, opening up the possibilities of mutual contaminations and changing boundaries instead of stable divides.

Jacques Derrida has discussed the critical possibilities of exploration as dance, especially in connection with those who are dispossessed of a place whence to speak, such as women, and their search for “home.” In an interview entitled *Choreographies* he, along with Christie V. McDonald, discusses the feminist expedition towards finding “Woman’s Place” in the midst of the roaring waves of a Western, humanist history in which “Woman” becomes what is missing or takes the place of the Eternal Feminine. Derrida is critical of this quest, since it might very easily end up where sentences beginning with those exact words, “Woman’s Place,” themselves end up, that is: “‘At home’ or ‘in the kitchen,’” bringing an abrupt end to the journey, halting all movement by imposing a “house arrest, *assignation à résidence* as they say in French penitentiary language.” Instead Derrida poses the question: “Why must there be a place for woman? And why only one, single, completely essential place?”¹⁵

According to Derrida, the lack of a fixed place in a linear history of progress is exactly what might make it possible for women to move, or to dance, as advocated by the anarchist feminist Emma Goldman.¹⁶ Instead of a revolution based on the concept of linearity and progress, a quest towards a fixed point (“Woman’s Place”), Derrida discusses the possibility of movement that has the qualities of dance, that is, movement that disturbs and disrupts linearity in an almost choreographed possession, reminding me of the stories of medieval *choreomania*, where people would dance for days and days, singing, screaming, and hallucinating until they dropped. This is a movement towards many places since “the dance changes place and above all changes *places*.” As such, who, then, needs to “start all over again making maps, topographies, etc.?”¹⁷

The kind of movement suggested by Derrida has no need of maps. It is an improvisational dance, an explorative choreography – not a voyage by sea in the search for one place in particular. Perhaps the Here be Monsters sea maps will no longer be needed at all if the figure of explorative movement is not the image of the seafarer but the image

of the dancer? This change of imagery, however, does not change the fact that, in our travels, *there be monsters*. Whether by dancer or seafarer, monsters are to be reckoned with, and different ways of imagining the subject of knowledge must therefore take seriously the promising warning “here be monsters.” These monsters cannot simply be cast as constitutive others who must be kept on their own side of the Divide; rather, they must be understood as both strange and near – as a part of, and at the same time in excess of, the explorer herself. The very existence of the explorer and her possibilities for movement is in this way dependent on the monstrous and vice versa. As Margrit Shildrick writes:

Monsters clearly cannot exist apart from “normal” bodies, but at the same time they are excessive to the binary, uncontained by any fixed category of exclusion. Like women, they refuse to stay in place: they change shape, they combine elements which should remain separate; in short they are labile.¹⁸

Like women, monsters cannot be fixed in one particular place, nor can they be ignored. They move like *choreomaniacs* and might even offer themselves as companions in dance, a *danse macabre* with that which goes bump in the night.

The *danse macabre* – or *choreomania* – might then offer ways of encountering monsters that can spark alliances between the dispossessed, between those with no place to call their own, those who cannot be found on any of the “known historical” maps mentioned by Blake in the beginning of this *vade mecum*. Since *choreomania* is not in line, not part of a march of historical progress leading away from the unknown towards absolute enlightenment and knowledge of the world, the time and space of the *danse macabre* must be understood as a nonlinear movement, one that is “out of joint.”¹⁹ Monsters and specters, as choreomaniac dance partners, move themselves in this disjointed way. They are constitutive of the subject, as well as an excess of it; they are a trace of that which is not the subject, that which is “other” and which links the subject to the strangeness of what is yet to come. The monster is thus what Derrida calls an *arrivant*: one “who will come, who cannot be kept apart.” It is someone who messes up time and space through a “refusal of linear temporality [that] is no mere play on words, but a marker that what is yet to come is paradoxically already here. If the other is both excessive and constitutive to the self, then it cannot be assigned to either a fixed time or space.”²⁰

Looking for monsters is thus not about finding a specific place where they might be and then go there, following a straight line toward discovery and enlightenment; the quest is about movement itself, the patterning made by tapping paws, claws, and feet. It is about wandering, about going astray, which makes us perhaps want to consider how any *vade mecum* or handbook of monsters always already fails. Failing is related to wandering through the Latin *errare*, meaning to wander, to go astray. It is also related to dance through *saltare*: to dance, to fail.

Perhaps there is no need to discount the Here be Monsters after all; its failure as a proper map might be exactly the thing that makes it useful as a navigational instrument in monstrous terrains.

The incredible failing maps of monsters!

"You know on the old mariners' maps the cartographers would designate uncharted territories by writing 'Here be Monsters,'" Scully said to Mulder, and he replied: "I've got a map of New York just like that." According to Erin C. Blake, however, lists of "all known historical maps" show up empty when asked about the monster maps. But then, what if one does not look for historical maps, in the sense of history as a linear narrative, a march towards fixed points and knots on a string pulled by a traditional understanding of progress? Looking for maps such as that would demand not looking for "all known historical maps." Rather, it would take a different kind of "looking," one that inter-views, or peeks at the in-between,²¹ at that which does not exist, that which is yet to come, or has never been. That is, something spectral.

The Here be Monsters maps are specters. They exist on the threshold between fact and fiction, they are understood to be things of the past ("the old mariners' maps"), while occupying a place in narratives of the present ("I've got a map of New York just like that") and they have the ability to map all kinds of monstrous spaces (the sea and the streets of New York). As such, the Here be Monsters maps seem to be as mobile as the world/s they are of, their time is far from a chronological one, and the spaces they point out are monstrously restless. These maps are not something the explorer may hold in her hands, or that I might be able to dig out from an archive, but they are there nonetheless, offering a recognizable account of the dangers of movement and exploration, of worlds whose boundaries are constantly shifting in tune with the music and the tapping of *danse*. These maps fail; they wander. They are the companions of *choremaniacs* looking for partners in a *danse macabre*, seeing the road ahead take shape through the diffractive lens of glass and watering eyes.

But where *is* the home of monsters and the dispossessed? Sure, a homely place is the *danse* itself, especially for women, since dance is, as pointed out by Derrida, *la danse*.²² But in what other ways might home be imagined when monsters are so near yet so strange?

The critique of "Woman's Place" does not leave the concept of "home" completely irrelevant. Instead "home" becomes the borders of the self, not a fixed point on a map. This is the haunted house, the uncanny home, where things keep returning without ever really having left, and what separates this sense of "homeliness" from "Woman's Place" is the demand that guests should never be "domesticated." Hospitality must be unconditional in order to let the guests keep their "strangeness,"²³ like the partners in Haraway's dance of relating, in which the dancers transform each other through the mutual contamination and crossing over of "homely" borders in the twirling act of *respecere*.

As such, the world is in motion, a twirling, dancing motion that shapes and reshapes it and its dancers in constant encounters. No one exists outside the dance of relating, no one enters the dance fully formed. Allowing monsters and specters, ghosts, and ghouls to return and yet remain unfathomably strange is what makes them and their dance partners dodge the domestication that has otherwise been the fate of the dispossessed, such as women, who have had to live up to strict demands of domesticity to avoid eviction.²⁴ This is not home as "Woman's Place," house arrest as journey's end; it is home as the ever-changing boundaries of selves interlocked in monstrous dances, making the needles of compasses

spin as new worlds take shape as possibilities, as specters, something between reality and the imaginary, that which is here and that which is yet to come. This is part of an ethics of the impossible and a future shaped as the promises of monsters²⁵, a spectral future of creatures that “are always there ... even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet”.²⁶

Moving according to *choreomania* is thus a way of exploring that transforms the homely boundaries of the explorer herself, changing her through a *danse macabre* with the creatures whose bumps in the night are knocks on the door. It is a way of moving that warps time and space into something non-linear and not-one, opening the possibilities of something in-between, where monsters speak their promises of things to come.

This brings me back to the promise of Smile.dog.

Danse on broken bones

“I thought for a long time about my options,” writes Mary E. in a letter to Mr. L. “I could show it to a stranger, a co-worker [...] And what would happen then? Well, if Smile.dog kept its word, I could sleep. Yet, if it lied, what would I do? And who was to say that something worse would not come for me if I did as the creature asked?”²⁷

After sending the letter, Mary E. commits suicide rather than passing on the curse by showing Smile.dog’s picture to someone else. The *danse* has worn her down, she wants to stop the twirling and the tapping, since, as any horror story worth its salt will tell you, if you cannot shake off the dance from time to time, you may end up like Sam, a character from another internet horror story, who “stepped on that broken leg, twirled on it, jumped on it. All in time with the fiddle.”²⁸ No one can move forever, especially not in the *danse macabre*. Monsters may be valuable allies, but the skin-ripping and organ-bursting transformations they offer can be painful. Becoming monstrous in times and spaces that value sameness and stability over hybrid connections is not without its risks; trying to push boundaries in a world-making game might mean slipping and falling over the edge instead of opening up new terrains. As such, becoming a monstrous *choreomaniac* is not a neat solution. It may not even be a solution at all, since *choreomaniacs* were rumored to have sometimes died during the dancing plagues, taking them to another realm of the *danse macabre*. Thinking through and navigating with the specter of Here be Monsters therefore does run the risk of becoming overly romantic, forgetting the pain that often comes when following the trace of the other in the self means straying away from accepted paths, edging closer to the roaring waterfalls at the end of the world where bursts of outrage and cries for help might not be recognized as such, nor even heard. Mary E.’s desperation and her wish for sleep is therefore understandable, and so is the doubt that infiltrates Mr. L. and makes him hesitate to open the smile.jpg attached to the e-mail he ends up receiving.

Still. This does not change the fact and fiction that *there be monsters*, living in the seams and cracks of a restless world that shifts and turns in and out of time with the fiddle. Learning to converse and move with specters and monsters is therefore part of an ethics of world-making instead of world-discovering, of *respecere* instead of the

domestication of strangers. Mary E., however, has difficulties moving and conversing with monsters in ways that will not break her bones. She seems very dedicated to the traditional, humanist sense of ethics, that is, an ethics of clear bodily boundaries that protect the subject from the outside world.²⁹ Within such an ethics the strangeness and un-domesticated characteristics of the monstrous *arrivant* is perceived as nothing but threatening. Here are no doors left ajar to the “home” of the subject; no “others” are allowed inside; and if they do by mistake find their way in, it is the duty of the ethical subject to not let them out again, to not pass on the contamination. Doing so would be an indication of “depravity,” Mary E. writes, and it would mean the disruption of bodily boundaries in encounters of possession and contamination. She therefore begs Mr. L. to “[s]top while you are still whole.”³⁰

Mary E. is not whole. But neither is Mr. L. No one enters the dance of relating fully formed; all critters are shaped as they relate, as they entangle in *danse*. This is what makes changes and movement possible, but it is also what causes Mary E. difficulties. She does not listen to the monster; she does not shift her perspective. If she had, she might have glimpsed that Smile.dog was indeed not intent on keeping its word: what it asked for was for words to be spread, not kept. It is only this dispersion that offers the *choreomaniac* some rest, since it will allow the monstrous guest to not just return (monstrous *arrivants* always already do), but also to leave, to *spread out*. The open door is what prevents the struggle of domestication, which exhausts the dispossessed, in this case Mary E. who has found her “place” at home and is now keeping the door shut on herself as well as any others. As Mr L. says: “[A]t the last moment Mary changed her mind and locked herself in the couple’s bedroom, refusing to meet with me.”³¹ Mary E.’s loyalty to the ideal of unbreachable bodily boundaries makes it impossible for her to take advantage of the possibilities of the inter-view that is offered to her by the narrator, that is, a peek at the in-between. The in-between makes it possible to change speed, to slow down, to linger, and to rest. These places are not so fully strange that they consume partners in *danse*, nor so domesticated that they cannot promise something different, something that has never been, is already there, or yet to come. In other words; the inter-view that Mary E. rejected might have helped her move from the house arrest she was enduring together with Smile.dog towards the in-between where lingering is as much a possibility as the twirls and jumps of *danse*.

Heeding the advice of monstrous companions might help explorers move well in worlds in the making. They are the specters of Here be Monsters, the *choreomaniac*’s companions in the *danse macabre* that brings her close to the edges of worlds but also – if looked for and looked after in an act of *respecere*, following the specter of Here be Monsters – help her steer clear of the roaring waterfalls and crushing maelstroms at worlds’ end.

Here ends a *vade mecum* and search for creature companionship. But others have already begun. Looking is, after all, a summoning and a summoning is a risk of a looking back, of *respecere*. In the case of creepypasta this looking back extends itself not just to the characters within the narratives, but to ‘meatspace’ readers too, arguing that the monsters are, indeed, part of your reality: they look back from the pages of diary entries. Witness statements. Scientific reports. Photography. And *vade mecums*.

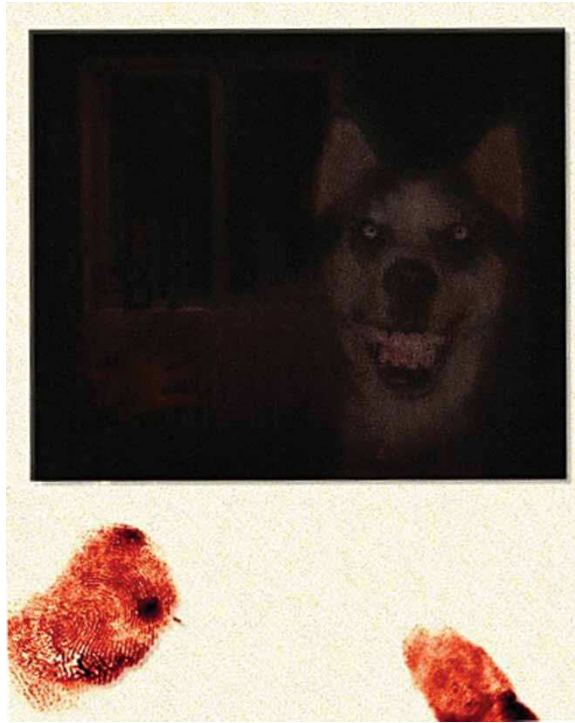


Figure 1. Picture of Smile.dog. Artist unknown.

Source: <http://www.creepypastaindex.com/creepypasta/the-curious-case-of-smile-jpg>

spread the word

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. "*Vade mecum*" means "go with me." Source: www.etymonline.com. Link: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=vade%20mecum> [Accessed 1 July 2013].
2. Braidotti (1996, 138).
3. *The X-Files* (1996).
4. Blake (1999).
5. Ibid.
6. Van Duzer (2012, 387–436).
7. I am grateful to Helga Sadowski, whose research at Linköping University has made me aware of the many nautical metaphors surrounding the Internet.

8. Ibid.
9. Haraway (1991, 188).
10. The Curious Case of Smile.jpg.
11. Haraway (2008, 11).
12. Ibid., 25.
13. Ibid., 3.
14. Ibid., 19.
15. Derrida and McDonald (1982, 68). Italics in original.
16. Ibid., 66.
17. Ibid., 69. My italics.
18. Shildrick (2002, 129).
19. Derrida (2011, 21).
20. Shildrick (2002, 130).
21. Derrida and McDonald (1982, 67).
22. Ibid., 66.
23. Derrida (2011).
24. See for example Tsing (2010).
25. Haraway (1992, 295–337).
26. Derrida quoted in Shildrick (2002, 129–130).
27. The Curious Case of Smile.jpg.
28. Charles (2009).
29. Shildrick (1999, 86).
30. The Curious Case of Smile.jpg.
31. Ibid.

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